

Women and Ageing: Experience and Implications

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ABSTRACT

A feminist analysis of the experiences of elderly Australian women is explored through sixteen biographical accounts. Through the employment of narrative material a classification of the powerful stereotyping imposed upon these women is produced. The components of the stereotype are gathered together under three headings – social, physical and mental.

Despite evidence of their increasing statistical dominance, relatively little research has concentrated on elderly women. Indeed, there have been few studies conducted which look at the phenomenon of ageing and the experience of growing older with specific reference to women. This paper argues that the limited amount of study which has been conducted regarding elderly women serves by itself the adoption and reinforcement of a set of stereotypical assumptions which regard ageing, particularly for women, in negative terms. This stereotype is presented as reflected in social behaviour, the media and other dominant social institutions.

This paper examines the extent to which such negative images are adopted in reality, through the analysis of responses gained from interviews with sixteen elderly Australian women. Those generalisations of which the stereotype regarding elderly women is composed are identified within the categories of social, physical and mental capacities. Data are presented in relation to each generalisation which identify similarities and differences between responses and both support and contradict the notion that elderly women will internalise this stereotype.

Explanations of the evidence which contradicts such assumptions of internalisation are briefly explored and related to the degree of power or powerlessness which the women experience in their own lives. It is contended, however, that such personal power, in itself, does little to

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alter the ideology which denies elderly women social, economic and political power. This paper contends that for women, ageing results in a compounded cultural oppression by virtue of the process of gender-based role expectations to which they have been subjected.

Demographic Considerations

In 1980, 9.6% of Australia's population were estimated to be over the age of 65. The percentage of the population of this age has risen from 4% in 1901. In 1901 43.5% of those over 65 were female. By 1980 the percentage of women over 65 had grown to 58%. Women constitute a greater proportion of the 'old' population: 71.2% of persons over 85 years of age are women.¹ Since 1881, life expectancy has increased from 47 for males and 51 for females to 70 for males and 77 for females.

Elderly women are more likely than elderly men to be widowed and living alone. Of men aged 65–69 years 10% are widowed, which rises to 42% of males aged 80 and over. For women, the proportion increases from 37% of women 65–69 years to 75% of women 80 and over. In 1976 65% of males over 70 years of age were married, while the comparative figure for females was 27%. Nineteen per cent of males over 75 years of age lived alone, while the figure for females was 42.3%.

The general tendency for women to marry men older than themselves, as well as the higher life expectancy for women, results in a situation where not only are most of the elderly female, but most of these are widows and living alone.

Theories of Ageing

Limited attention has been paid to the specific situation of elderly women by researchers. This, in itself, may be seen as indicative of the low importance with which the experience of these women is regarded. The lack of research oriented to elderly women has certainly not, however, been accompanied by a lack of theorising about ageing. Since the 1960s, major theories have been proffered to explain the situation of aged persons. The main theories are known as disengagement theory, activity theory, developmental theory and symbolic interactionist theory.

Disengagement theory² proposes that the elderly person and society undergo a process of mutual withdrawal which is explained as a natural

and inevitable procedure of functional benefit both to the ageing individual and to society. Thus lowering of activity levels and involvement in social interaction are regarded as indicative of 'correct' ageing.

Cumming and Henry's theory has met with extensive criticism and been described as 'the geriatric euphemism for social death'.³ It serves as a justification for the exclusion of elderly people from social activities and does not regard their separation from society as a problem warranting concern but rather as a beneficial process. It attributes to innate processes situations which may themselves be consequences of social aspects of ageing. Yet these aspects could be highly significant in explaining the extent to which a person is engaged or disengaged from the social world.

Cumming,⁴ in applying disengagement theory to the position of elderly women, claims that since women have had a 'smoother' lifestyle, disengagement is an easier process for them. She sees women's roles as largely unchanged throughout their lives, so that they do not experience major transitions. Withdrawal from social interaction is, then, less difficult than for males. In criticism, Kline⁵ points out that such an analysis of women and ageing ignores the discontinuity and impermanence which may characterise women's life situations. Further, research has suggested that almost twice as many women as men experience change in relation to the variables of residential location, marital status and position in the labour force.⁶

Criticisms of disengagement theory resulted in the emergence of activity theory. Social integration and participation are regarded as necessary criteria for satisfactory ageing in order that lost roles be replaced with other types of behaviour. Research evidence highlights the inadequacy of activity theory as an interpretation of ageing. Indeed, data contradicts the basic assumption that an active and engaged lifestyle will necessarily result in happiness, while a passive lifestyle does not necessarily produce unhappiness.⁷ Research based on activity theory has been concerned primarily with the 'lost roles' which previously connected the individual woman with society and the need to replace these roles with newly acquired roles.⁸ Lopata's study of American widows⁹ does look at social factors. She sees lack of involvement in social activities as largely the result of neglect on the part of society, which does little to assist the re-engagement of women whose life patterns have been broken.

Although Lopata recognises in a later study¹⁰ that the level of social involvement which elderly women achieve may be a reflection of their

socio-economic status, her proposed solutions reinforce the notion that for elderly women satisfactory ageing can be achieved if they conform to a particular set of criteria by changing aspects of themselves. Lopata continues to locate the ultimate cause of elderly women's situations at the level of the individual:

The widows need to learn how to get a job, join an organization, build friendships, look well, etc. Beauticians, fashion co-ordinators and others who train people how to be socially acceptable ought to provide this information to the widows who have never learned to be publicly presentable.¹¹

Lopata fails to recognize the importance of asking why elderly women are incapacitated by lack of skills, money, transport and education. If she offers any explanation for this, it is as a failure in the socialisation process. She claims that a study of women's situations will certainly 'point up the societal failure to socialise its members sufficiently so that they may acquire competence in maintaining old and building new interpersonal relations'.¹² Alternative interpretations are possible but she fails to explore them. An equally valid interpretation could be that society has been highly successful in socialising elderly women to see themselves as not having any right to receive sufficient skills, money, transport and education to remain active. Further, it may well be part of their socialisation to believe that they are powerless to bring about any change in this situation.

The third major theoretical approach to ageing sees adjustment to old age as primarily determined by the individual's personality characteristics. Developmental theory has resulted in categorisations of the elderly people into types.¹³ Such an analysis attributes minimal importance to the social context in which ageing takes place and disregards completely the external constraints which influence the ageing experience. As Estes¹⁴ recognises,

None of the three theories takes a direct interest in the social structure and the cultural and historical contexts in which the ageing process occurs, although lip service is often given to the importance of these factors.

Jacobs¹⁵ presents thirteen separate roles for older women, which she sees as assisting clarification of the reality which elderly American women face. She proposes that the thirteen roles may be useful as a conceptual framework so that older women may engage in increased enrichment by the addition of roles. She concludes that old women suffer from the 'widespread faults of society in general' but fails to amplify this, and proceeds to locate the solution to this suffering in the mix of personal characteristics of old women themselves.

The fourth framework used to explore and explain the situation of the elderly is symbolic interactionist theory. This model¹⁶ is primarily concerned with the meanings which actors attach to their behaviour and experience and acknowledges that actions occur within the context of a set of social rules.¹⁷ In interpreting the situation of older people symbolic interactionists do recognise the influence of external social factors, such as class, race and sex, during the lifespan. But insufficient attention is paid to the analysis of these factors and the focus is on revealing to social actors what they are doing and on the restoration of communication between actors. Conflict is assumed to be primarily a result of mistaken ideas about reality, and uncovering the actors' own interpretation of their experience should be the prime goal of work on the elderly, according to this perspective.

While acknowledging the important contributions made by symbolic interactionists, this paper asserts that analysis of social and structural conditions which influence individual perspectives is also a necessary focus for work on ageing. The social structure within which interaction and interpretation occur engenders beliefs as to what constitutes acceptable action, and that same structure exercises constraints upon the actors themselves.

The symbolic-interactionist perspective has been employed by Mathews¹⁸ in order to study the social world of elderly women, and understand their experiences from their own point of view. Oldness is recognised as an attribute which is discrediting, and the perspective challenges assumptions of the biological determination of age as a social category, along with gender, class and ethnicity. Analysis is restricted, however, to the micro-level of their subjective accounts of what it means to be old. While providing a valuable insight into the lives of the women in question, Mathews attaches too little importance to the social context and political and economic structure within which elderly women hold these particular self-images.

Russell's study¹⁹ of the experience of ageing explores the meanings which elderly people themselves attach to old age. Russell does not, however, address the questions of implications or source of experiences of specific sub-groups among those people she studies. Although the experiences and identities of the women studied are seen by her to warrant separate attention in terms of external social factors, this cannot be undertaken within the limits of a symbolic-interactionist perspective.

Past investigation, then, has been unnecessarily limited to selected aspects of the ageing person – innate characteristics, activity levels, personality characteristics and perceptions of reality. Moreover they do little to challenge the stereotypes of elderly people which affect not only

the solutions to 'problems' but also the way in which the elderly see themselves and their situation. An elderly woman's ideas and self-image will have been constructed within a particular social and historical context and will largely reflect the traditional stereotypes.

This paper concentrates on some of the more obvious features of the stereotype regarding elderly women, presenting instances where women in studies describe themselves in conformity with the stereotype and instances where they do not. As a perspective through which the individual situations and experiences of women might be understood, the development of feminist theory contained an implicit awareness of the importance of the interface between the personal lives of women in a variety of realms, and the external structure of power relations which give rise to and perpetuate these situations.²⁰

The feminist perspective is regarded, in what follows, as an appropriate critical theory for the study of elderly women, since it may be identified as an approach which allows for the presentation of subjective experience, while necessitating a political analysis of this subjective account. It introduces the notion of the 'personal as political' which acts as a guiding principle of feminist analysis and action.

The Stereotype

In this paper, the image of elderly women in Australian society is regarded as a shared set of beliefs and attitudes which are mainly negative. Such generalisations result in the development of a stereotype of elderly women, which is expressed in societal attitudes and structures. The idea of elderly women as unhealthy, unattractive, asexual and dependent, has been perpetuated in Australian society uncritically and on the basis of doubtful evidence.

The cultural subordination of elderly women is taught through children's literature, adult magazines and television programmes. The characters of the old witch and the evil aged step-mother are familiar to us all. A woman's perspective on her own ageing might be expected to result from the images of herself which she encounters in the outside world. Indeed, the negative picture of ageing women is portrayed and reinforced through the ridicule to which they are subjected in jokes which depict them as old maids and as unsuccessfully attempting to conceal their age. Derogatory colloquialisms such as 'old bag', 'hag' and 'crone' are further examples of this portrayal. Such efforts at humour reflect socially established attitudes towards older women.²¹ The almost total absence of elderly women in the various forms of the

media is evidence both of their low status and of the belief that they are of no interest to an audience other than as a source of amusement.

As Jan Mercer puts it:

The manipulation ranges through all the institutions of Australian society, manifesting itself in the organizations which have been formed to maintain traditional behaviour: the schools, the courts, parliament, the political parties, the family, the churches, the media, hospitals, universities and in the labour market.²²

The creation and perpetuation of a stereotype which presents elderly women in a negative, derogatory fashion serves to maintain a situation in which they are denied power within a patriarchal social structure. The internalisation of such negative images will occur through the process of socialisation. In complying with various roles experienced during a lifetime, women have repeatedly undergone a process of learning to meet social expectations. Even more importantly, it is evident from a review of writings and studies of elderly women that the writers and researchers themselves usually adopt and reinforce the same set of negative ideas. Such generalisations mirror attitudes towards and about elderly women. Indeed, those are the very attitudes which result in discrimination and oppression and reinforce social structures which portray old age, especially for women, as an unhappy experience.

As Summers²³ points out, an exploration of oppression will not only involve an examination of structures, but must include an assessment of the extent to which the less powerful comply with their situation of powerlessness. The construction of negative self-images through the socialisation process will, according to such an analysis, result in the sustaining of their subordinate positions by those who are themselves subjugated. Such an analysis reveals the ways in which a stereotype regarding elderly women is constructed and reinforced, both through social structures and the process of internalisation. In view of the strength of the prevailing stereotype, one would expect a study such as the one reported here to produce evidence regarding the adoption by women of the roles and statuses projected on to those who are old and female. Thus in this paper, concerned with the experiences and situations of sixteen elderly women, personal and significant events are interpreted within a framework which recognises the political origins and implications of these events and processes.

Writers who have used feminist perspectives to explore the question have provided valuable insights.²⁴ These writers have, however, either asserted generalisations without supporting evidence from elderly women, or they have selected one specific aspect of the stereotype for

investigation. Those who present evidence do not appear to be interested in elderly women who have, apparently, not internalised some or many aspects of the stereotype. Block, Davidson and Grambs²⁵ see the stereotype of elderly women as negative and slow to change but they are also concerned to explain cases where the reality of the way some women see themselves is different from the way society sees them.

Research Method

The sample of women interviewed was drawn from a variety of different sources and no rigorous method of sampling was employed. Those women who were known to be willing to be interviewed were contacted through personal sources, a nurse, a rehabilitation doctor, a social worker and one of the informants herself, who suggested I interview her friend. Clearly, the sample selection was by no means random since the chance of any one person being chosen for the study was unknown. The sample could best be described as fortuitous.²⁶

Only women of or over 60 years of age and only women who were Australian born were interviewed. Although 60 years is also the socially recognised (Australian) age of retirement for women, it was chosen as the minimum age limit primarily to ensure that the women would not be immediately post-menopausal and that their chronological status could not be described as middle aged. The requirement that the women all be Australian born was an attempt to increase the similarities of their cultural backgrounds, so that some understanding of the historical events which affected their lives could be obtained and related to their responses. Moreover, in seeking to explore and explain the perceptions of these women it was considered essential that there was some sharing of a common cultural history and heritage in order to communicate and analyse their situations. It was also important to be able to show a personal knowledge of historical events and changes which were referred to during the interview. Even though not experienced personally by the interviewer, events could be identified more easily and their significance shared.

The women interviewed were living in hospital, a hostel, a nursing home, alone in their own home, with other women, and with their families. Their levels of education, work experiences, marital situations and financial positions also vary considerably. The data were collected using the interview technique in order to gather life history material. Questions of a general nature were included along with specific questions which sought their impressions of 'oldness' as it relates to

women other than themselves. All names have been changed. In this paper the stereotype is examined by taking several generalisations and interpreting data from interviews using a feminist analysis. For purposes of discussion, the generalisations are grouped as social, physical and mental capacities.

Social Aspects of the Stereotype

Wife, Mother and Carer

One stereotype defines women in terms of traditional female roles – wife and mother, carer and nurturer. This renders elderly women obsolete because they are no longer contributing to society through those identities which have been assigned to them. As Oakley puts it: ‘Her role is to act as the provider of emotional warmth and stability for the whole family, to maintain good tension-free relationships between the family members; to keep the family together.’²⁷

Bart refers to the effect which the loss of this socially prescribed purpose has on women as they approach old age. ‘With the child-bearing and rearing period in the West becoming much shorter, the other major female role may end when a woman has half her adult life to live. So the completion of her “service” role is frequently marked by depression.’ It is the women who have internalised the cultural propositions who are most prone to depression when their children leave.²⁸ The crisis of social identity which Bart examines may be seen to result from the deprivation of a separate self for women who have been defined through their relationships with those to whom they expected to devote their lives. ‘Their status in society, their worth to themselves, their joys in life, were all stated to be derived from the value, status and achievements of other people whom they serve.’²⁹

The most obvious cases where the stereotype has been internalised are cited below.

Mrs Brown is in her 80s and living alone in her own home, with her daughter close by. She did not take up a scholarship to a prestigious high school because, as the eldest daughter, it was expected of her to stay at home and assist her mother with duties. She referred to this as ‘a big regret’. She described in detail the difficult and heavy domestic work which the women in her family performed. She nursed her husband for several years after he was paralysed by a stroke, during which time her frail ninety-one-year-old father also lived with and was cared for by her. She described herself as happiest when she was doing things for her family, and felt needed when they were around her house.

She was proud of her work as a voluntary nurse during the First World War, and knitted socks 'day and night'. She now works for the local church street stalls, and attends church functions. She described her children leaving home as 'a very lonely experience. I missed them terribly and noticed the distance from them. I don't think I've adjusted well to being alone.'

Another woman, raised in a large family in the country, told me 'I used to do most of the sewing and cooking for the house. I'd sooner get out and milk a cow.' She spoke of her unfulfilled desire to be a nurse, and said 'my parents wouldn't have liked anyone to think they couldn't keep me'. She related the most important things in her life as 'meeting my husband and having my son – to me that was my life. Other things may have been important, but you just lived for them, whatever you did had to centre around those two.' She nursed her husband for three years, after his heart attack. 'He used to sit up in that chair night after night. He couldn't lie down so I'd sit up awake crocheting, so he'd sleep. He died while I was making a rug for my granddaughter. Finishing it was the hardest thing I've ever done.'

But other women did not perceive their identity as closely dependent on service to others in a family. One Australian study of widowhood has found that there are women who 'do see benefits in being "single" again; in particular the independence'.³⁰ Two cases are cited.

Mrs Cairns, in her 70s, lives in a church hostel. She describes herself as having 'lived a full life'. She spent several years working for an airline in New Guinea, living away from her husband, and told me that she raised her daughter 'on my own, virtually'. When asked if she was glad to be rid of any tasks, she said 'Number One – I don't have to wash his dirty socks and look after him anymore. He divorced me five years ago. I'm not a thing any more, I'm a person.' She was adamant that women should determine their own life choices, telling me 'if you get fulfilment in a certain way, do it. I have a smoke, drink, not sex, unfortunately.'

Miss North, 89 years old, is living in a nursing home in the suburbs of Sydney, in which she has been a resident since 1973. She was educated in a convent, grew up in a materially secure environment, which she was forced to leave on her father's remarriage when she was 20, and she was always in a financial position to be self-supporting. That she did not marry was very much a deliberate choice, and she described to me one occasion on which she turned down a proposal,

'We'll have lots of children', he said, 'that's God's will.' 'Well I can't help God's will', I told him, 'but I don't ever want a family.' That ended that.

Her reasons for rejecting marriage were not, however, explained in terms of her 'rights', or 'freedom', but rather:

I felt I wouldn't be able to look after them all – I was no good at school, I was the delicate one, so I couldn't look after children and see they did their homework. I felt incapable. So now I'm single, but it doesn't worry me.

The comments of these women would confirm that many elderly women may be relieved to be free of the responsibilities of a family, and their self-concepts may be enhanced as a result.

Unproductive

Elderly women, like all who are elderly, are also stereotyped as no longer able to perform any valuable productive function in society. In this sample only a few women had been employed in the workforce for an extensive period. It is not possible to explore the significance of retirement for the elderly in this study. For most of these women the loss of roles of housewife and mother, already discussed, meant a loss of their major life occupation. It is notable that although the tasks of the homemaker are vital to the growth of the economy, the contribution made is financially ignored. It is claimed by Sommers and Shields that:

because homemaking is not recognised as work and not paid, this loss of a job is not called mandatory retirement, but given the sociological description of the 'empty nest syndrome'... most women who are now in their 50s and 60s bought the social contract of man as the breadwinner and woman the homemaker.³¹

Voluntary work was widespread in the sample and deserves consideration. Such work has also been defined as part of a woman's role and its economic value remains largely unrecognised. For several of the women I interviewed, charitable work was and had been one of the primary activities of their lives.

Mrs Black, in her 90s, lives alone, and only goes out to see the doctor. When I arrived at her house she showed me into a room piled high with materials and boxes full of teddy bears, frogs, clowns, and doll's clothes. She told me she spends most of her time sewing items which other women sell at the markets to raise money for cancer research. When I expressed amazement at the amount of work she did, she asked me, 'What else would I do, look at the wall?'. She indicated that her work made her feel useful.

Mrs Thatcher is 69 and has been a long-term hospital patient since

she had a stroke in her forties. She is involved in a group which makes items to sell at the hospital fête. She specialises in blender covers, and spends most of her days in bed sewing. She said 'I've got this and the TV, there's a lot worse off than me'.

Lack of commitment

The extent of commitment which these women show to the work which they do for a particular cause runs contrary to the notion that they are no longer able to demonstrate commitment to anything, which is another aspect of the stereotype.

A different kind of commitment is evident with Mrs Reynolds, who is 75, and has lived on her own since her husband died two years ago. She is a member of the Soviet Friendship Society, active in the Labor Party, involved in the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and saw her recent visit to the Soviet Union as definitely the most important event in her life. When asked about changes she had seen in her lifetime, she talked about President Reagan, the threat of nuclear war, Poland, and the American involvement in El Salvador. To my mind she demonstrated a strong commitment to working for international justice.

Possibly the only example where some commitment was not evident was Miss North, who told me that she hadn't rejected marriage out of preference for any other commitment.

I didn't do anything else with my life. I didn't work – I never did anything. I didn't want to. I never had to work for money. I suppose if I had it might have been different. Now I don't do anything. I just sit.

Knowing that she sees a lot of her family, I asked if she liked talking. 'No, not really, if they're here that's good', was her reply. 'I used to knit, sew and read, now all three are hard to do'.

Lonely, depressed and isolated

One further social aspect of the stereotype represents the elderly woman as lonely and depressed, and having to contend with social isolation.³² She is seen as having few social acquaintances, and going out very rarely. Furthermore, the image of her as frightened of harassment and assault and afraid to leave her house implies that she is forced into lonely isolation.

Mrs King, in her 90s, referred to her lack of friends, saying that they had all gone. She recalled her impression of her mother in a similar situation:

She lived until she was 99, and used to say to me 'no one ever comes to see me any more'. I'd say, 'Mum, they've all gone'. She'd sit at the window and watch everyone, and say 'Mrs So and So's going to tennis today'. It's difficult, really.

When asked if she would change anything about living in the rehabilitation hospital Mrs Carter referred to the lack of companionship.

There's no one I can talk to here, so I get pretty down from time to time, and take myself for walks around the place. I'll be glad to get back to the hostel.

Other women did not evidence the stereotype. Mrs Reynolds was one example. Her political involvements are a vital part of her contact with other people through meetings and demonstrations. She also goes to the movies frequently, sees friends she has known for a long time and enjoys the company of young people she knows. She recalled one occasion recently when she was having dinner with friends, and had to catch the last train home.

All the way home I thought my kids would kill me if they knew I was out at this time.

Physical Aspects of the Stereotype

Youth and Beauty

Of particular significance is the aspect of the stereotype which defines beauty in women. To be worthy of acceptance, a woman must present herself as physically attractive. Sontag³³ sees women as having been allowed only one standard of physical attractiveness – youth. She sees a man's attractiveness as enhanced by ageing – grey hair and lines being signs of maturity and sophistication, while growing older robs a woman of her main value. She refers to the 'double standard of ageing', which renders a woman sexually ineligible earlier than men. While older men receive approval for seeking companionship with younger women, an older woman seeking out or marrying a younger man is the subject of criticism and disapproval.

Men are allowed to age without penalty, in several ways that women are not. This society offers even fewer rewards for ageing women than it does men.

Levitt³⁴ refers to women as 'doubly penalized' by this process of obsolescence. Cosmetic industries aid and exploit women in their attempts to maintain youthfulness.³⁵ Sontag sees the negativity of the stereotype of ageing for women reflected in their unwillingness to reveal their ages and refers to this as 'self-condemnation'.

Writing of her own experiences of ageing, Moss³⁶ sees women's options as limited:

She can prolong her career as sexual object, lying about her age, rewriting her past... and devoting herself to the cultivation of her image. Don't tell me it is human nature for women to cease to be attractive early.

Only one of the women I interviewed cautioned her companion not to tell me her age, and joked about being sixty.

Another woman told me she was 91 and said 'What do you think of that?' and another in her 70s told me the year in which she was born, stopped and said in a surprised tone of voice, 'I've been around for a while, haven't I?'

Not all the women were so little affected by the stereotype. When asked what physical changes mattered to her, Mrs Cairns put her hands up to her face and said

Well, it's the ravages of time, of course – this skin. Nature is cruel to women, she is, we cop the lot, we're just allowed to live longer.

When I asked her if she thought that society had anything to do with those ravages, she strongly disagreed.

You lose your figure, your good looks – you lose everything. What have you got left? Nothing but your wrinkles and grey hair. The rot sets in.

Other women interpreted my question about physical changes in a more general sense and referred to fading eyesight, loss of memory or arthritis, which implies that for them aspects of their appearance were not their main concern to do with the physical changes of ageing.

Menopause

A second physical aspect of societal belief about elderly women is evident in interpretations of the menopause by renowned medical experts. Menopause is regarded as the termination of biological usefulness, as a physiological signal that womanhood has ended, and as almost inevitably accompanied by distressing physiological and psychological changes.

'Once the ovaries stop, the very essence of being a woman stops. Without oestrogen the quality of being female disappears... She is not really a man, but no longer a functional woman.'³⁷ The quality of femaleness is clearly not seen as surviving the passing of fertility, and reproduction is seen as the primary purpose in a woman's life. One writer has referred to a woman during the climacteric as 'suddenly desexed'. As a negative experience, menopause has been 'shrouded in

silence', a subject on which women have only recently begun to share their experiences and ideas.³⁸ As with changes in her experience, the stereotype regards difficulties associated with menopause as natural. It has been a common belief that a woman must tolerate and adjust to these difficulties so as to disguise the fact that she may be experiencing change of life. Indeed, it may be the view of menopause as an affliction which leads women to avoid admitting they are menopausal.³⁹

Further evidence of the stereotypes operating in this area in western society comes from cross-cultural studies where it is found that, if women gain social status after the menopause, physiological and psychological symptoms are virtually non-existent.⁴⁰ Most of the women interviewed in this study said that they experienced the menopause without a great deal of difficulty. Other research has found that where negative symptoms occur, they are usually related to stress, low self-esteem, or similar factors associated with women's social situations, which are concurrent with menopause.⁴¹ Some of the women interviewed saw menopause as a difficult time, accompanied by a sense of relief, in that worry about pregnancy and periods was over. Three women reported that returning to paid employment helped alleviate their depression. Some examples of the responses follow.

I had a hysterectomy at 39. I was terrible with hot things – walk around with only my petticoat on. I met the doctor down the street, and got tablets, but it had already been on a long time.

It was hard, but you just had to grin and bear it, not talk to anyone and wait.

Change of life? thank goodness that's over – what a relief. If we needed support or advice we didn't get it, we just went through it.

The terrible heat! You could take tablets, but they weren't much good. If it wasn't that I was down to earth I could have got carried away and let it play on my nerves, but I had things to do and couldn't afford to be indulging in that sort of thing. But it was certainly *not* easy.

I used to wake up with feelings of dread and a doctor suggested I go and see a psychiatrist. I thought 'Gee, I'm off the rails'. I got a prescription and said to myself. 'Why have you let yourself get this way? It's irrational.' I told my daughter, although I wasn't going to. I never took one pill. It became a family joke, 'Mum's happy pills', they said.

These descriptions of the menopause as physiologically and psychologically depressing and distressing, as natural, as not to be discussed, but as an inevitable process to be endured, provide clear evidence that the stereotype is internalised by these women. But again different responses were forthcoming.

My last period was while my daughter was married. It wasn't too bad, but then I'm a sensible type. A lot of people say you're no good for your husband, but, with this bad arthritis I knew I was no good for him anyway. A lot of women work themselves into a frenzy and go off their heads – poor wretches. We do go through a lot, you know.

Another woman said,

I had a hysterectomy in my forties. Change of life didn't affect me. It was the best thing that happened really.

Frail and Passive

One of the most pervasive aspects of the stereotype of ageing is that elderly people are physically incapable and frail. Further, weakness and passivity are seen as typical in the female stereotype.⁴² Elderly women are depicted as less healthy and more hypochondriacal.

Evidence of the cultural stereotype in Australia is apparent in the fact that Australia has the highest number of nursing homes per head of population in the world. Moreover it is well documented that women continue to live longer than men. Sarton⁴³ refers to the tendency to think of elderly women as dependent and 'shove them into nursing homes', stating that it

blinds us to a greater reality – that old age can be magnificent. . . as one accepts oneself, warts and all, in old age, others accept one. . . and what might have been questioned in a girl of twenty is applauded as character, even enjoyed in a woman of seventy.

Mrs Thatcher and Mrs March did see themselves as frail and incapacitated. Mrs Thatcher, in hospital for over 20 years, was telling me about her family and showing me her photographs.

That's me, that's how I used to be before I became the heap I am now.

Mrs March, in her 90s, was deeply distressed at the prospect of never going home from the rehabilitation hospital.

Look at my hands, they used to play the piano, I used to teach it. I can't walk without a frame. My deafness is terrible now – I can hardly hear myself talk, it's terrible.

A contrary view comes from Mrs Woods and Mrs Cairns. When I asked her what she thought being a woman of her age was like, Mrs Woods laughed and said,

You know, you can speak your mind. You know you can get away with a lot when you have white hair, a hell of a lot. Maybe I'm just a bit forthright.

Mrs Cairns, 72 years old, described how she used to do exercises, standing on her head in her hostel room.

They all thought I was mad, but who cares, I wanted to exercise.

Mental Aspects of the Stereotype

Personal decisions

Along with the image of physical dependency, the stereotype creates a picture of elderly women as mentally incapable. They are portrayed as unable to make decisions about their lives, and as needing direction and guidance from others. That the elderly are often referred to as 'in second childhood' is indicative of this definition. Use of the label 'babies', particularly in an institutional setting, is reflective of the mental status which is accorded them. The frequency with which senility is seen as the explanation for behaviour lends further support to the stereotype.⁴⁴

Miss North expressed delight at her family's decision to find her another nursing home.

They put me in the car and brought me here – next thing I knew I'd moved. Mrs Brown told me that her family were discussing the possibility of her moving into a flat in another suburb:

It's this terrible indecision I've got, I don't really want to go, but they seem to think it's a good idea.

Others resist the stereotype. Mrs Thomas lives in an upstairs flat, and told me that people are suggesting she should move downstairs for her own safety, since she sometimes has problems walking.

I don't want to go downstairs. I don't care if it takes me half an hour to get down; this is my home. I've got everything set up here. I'm stubborn, but while I can crawl down those stairs, I will.

Views on the World

The image of elderly women as mentally incapable in relation to their own lives is extended to the idea that they are also unable to make decisions in relation to other people, the community, or society in general. Zaretsky⁴⁵ confirms that the 'correct' sphere of interest for women has traditionally been seen as the personal, rather than the

external social, political or economic world. This is particularly relevant in the formation of this aspect of the stereotype.

Evidence is not lacking that decisions about relationships to others are made by these women. Mrs King, who sold her house to her daughter and son-in-law who were living with her when her husband died, told me what she regarded as the most important consideration during living with family for the last 40 years.

Don't you worry yourself, you've got to work at it. I keep out of their hair. You see that? I've got that TV in here for myself, and I come in here to my room every night at 7.30. It doesn't matter if I'm well or sick, I keep myself separate, I keep out of their hair.

Another woman has made decisions and acted because of her concern about the conditions of care where she lives. Her activities have been viewed with disdain by others living around her, and those about whom she is complaining:

They call me a stirrer, a troublemaker for doing it, and make life here like a jail. It gets me down, mentally, they hate me, but I won't stop.

When asked if she thought growing older made a person more cut off from the world, Mrs Black was strongly in disagreement:

Oh no. I read the paper from back to front and can tell you about politics and anything else that's in it. My mother was the same. I don't do much with it, they're only my ideas, but I never argue the point with anyone.

Mrs Black and I discussed an article on the elderly which had appeared in the paper that day.

Rather surprisingly none of the sixteen women lacked opinions on moral and social issues such as pre-marital sex, drugs, alcohol, de facto relationships, nuclear power and wider issues. Several did point out to me that they have opinions but take no action about these issues.

Intellectual decline

In addition to assumptions of mental incapacity in relation to decision making, the elderly are regarded as generally intellectually frail. 'Cultural isolation is evident in the fact that old age in women can be a handicap for those who would like to improve their situation by returning to school...but the outside world is not ready to accommodate them.'⁴⁶

Certainly for particular women I interviewed, the fear of losing their intellectual abilities was a cause of great concern for them. Mrs Cairns, when talking about the physical changes she had to cope with, tapped her head and said, 'What do you expect, I'm 72. But I just hope I'm

all right up here'. Mrs King, who visits a nearby nursing home once a week, told me she was shocked and depressed at the people she saw. 'I got very upset at first. I thought is this my end? Some of the women – oh dear, they're dreadful.' Other women not only evidenced a lack of fear but also acted from a belief that they were far from mentally frail. Mrs Baker told me that with a friend she enrolled in a university course after retiring to the South Coast. She spoke of how much they had enjoyed it. During her interview, Mrs Thatcher unexpectedly told me that she has been writing a book about her life and her experiences since becoming permanently crippled, and being hospitalised. When I expressed interest, she laughed and said, 'Now who in their right mind would want to read a book about old Dorrie Thatcher?'

Conclusions

It is apparent, then, that the stereotype which relates to elderly women presents a decidedly negative image of them as inactive, unattractive, dependent, incapable of decision making, unable to commit themselves to anything and isolated. The desire to avoid identifying oneself as 'old' in order to reject the negative connotations associated with such a stereotype has been examined by Mathews. Indeed, Mathews views oldness as a stigma, 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting'.⁴⁷ For women, this image is compounded by the fact that, as women, their identity and status has been largely contingent upon their relationship with others.

As Janeway puts it:

Older women are in a double bind: we are expected to feel inferior not only as women, but also because we are too old.⁴⁸

In this sense, it is possible that elderly women are not merely 'coping with their identities', as Russell described, for this implies that their identities were previously intact and unspoiled. Rather, they may be coping with an extension and reinforcement of the non-identities which have characterised the stereotyping of them as women. Indeed, a number of the characteristics which have been attributed to the elderly in general, such as dependency, fragility, need for protection and the inability to make decisions alone, are also aspects of the stereotype of femininity which influence the process of sex-role socialisation.⁴⁹ Moreover, elderly women who do see themselves in terms of this stereotype will, more than likely, reflect a self-image which involves a lack of any

sense of personal status and power or control over their lives. This was evidenced in several of the responses obtained where women referred to their past lives as being uninteresting. Indeed, there was strong evidence in this study that particular women did not see themselves as important in any personal or political sense.

This low sense of past and present social value was expressed in some of the women's responses to my interest in interviewing them. One woman assured me, 'Oh you don't really want me. You want Miss Peckham. She's had an extremely interesting life – I really think you'd be better off talking to her.' Another began the interview by saying, 'I don't know what on earth I could tell you of any use'. A woman in her 70s who is very much involved in political activity, immediately answered my request with another woman's name, insisting that 'she'd be better' to talk to. Others told me their lives were ordinary, and 'of no interest to people out there', or that they 'hadn't really done anything'.

I interviewed each of these women, and found lives full of experience, work and determination. Other interviewers report similar reactions and findings.⁵⁰ McCrindle and Rowbotham comment on their interviews with women of varying ages:

All the women were diffident at the beginning, finding it hard to believe that their lives could be interesting to anyone but themselves and their families. Once they began talking, however, we discovered in the women we were interviewing the same fascination we had found when women described their lives and shared their formerly private complaints in small groups.⁵¹

When I asked Mrs March, who is 92 and a rehabilitation hospital resident, about her most important experiences, she said, 'There's nothing special, nothing important, really, we just moved about'.

One question in the interview aimed to elicit more directly the extent to which the women had internalised the whole stereotype. The question was 'What do you think it is like to be a woman your age in Australia?' Most women either saw the question as being about themselves or about their mothers or friends or other women. Mrs March saw old age as miserable. 'I've got nothing left. I feel like I'll never go home. My house is empty. I've outlived everyone. I wish I'd been taken'.

However, there were other women who did not express such low opinions of themselves or their lives. One woman consistently asked her family when I was coming, and prepared in advance what she wanted to tell me. Two women were interested to know more about my work, while Mrs Woods told me she had a neighbour who 'wanted to speak to me', and did. Another asked me what political party I supported before deciding whether she would talk to me.

Clearly, these women did not see themselves as 'old women' according to societal definitions. Mrs Carter, 82 years old, told me that she had learned to play croquet the day before the interview, and said she had 'hit it high and dry'. When I commented that it looked like she had found a new interest, she said, 'Oh no – croquet, that's an old woman's game. I'm not an old woman, I don't think. My mother was like that. When she was 82 she said "I'm not old", and she wasn't, she was quite all right.'

Mrs Reynolds talked about the concern of a friend of hers about getting older.

I told her, you're driving yourself into the grave, worrying about getting old. She's only twelve months older than me – You don't want to dwell on getting old, don't think about it. You'll spend all the time thinking I can't do this or that because I'm old. It's a crazy idea. While you think about it, you're ageing with it.

She continued to talk about her grandmother, comparing that life with her own.

My grandma wouldn't do half the things I do – she rested herself. At a set time every afternoon she would get a jug of hot water and we'd get to wash her back or brush her hair. Imagine what she'd think of me!

The task of explaining why some women appear to have internalised the stereotype while others appear to be uninfluenced in any global sense is not a simple one. Some of the interview questions explored past experiences, although a comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this study.

Certainly, many of the women I approached seemed to place a low value on their lives, which they saw as having no significance outside their own individual environment. Those women who saw themselves as having little to say of any importance were almost invariably those whose lives had lacked particular characteristics which had allowed other women to assert some degree of self-control over their own lives. A sense of self-importance and social status appeared to be related to constraints associated with socio-economic status, education level, participation in the paid labour force, financial situation and the accompanying attitude of their fathers and later husbands, to the correct social role for their daughters and wives.

As Acker⁵² points out, a woman's status and social position is generally assessed on the basis of that of a man. The influence of social class, which may well be very significant in determining the existence of such factors, certainly warrants further study. The argument presented here challenges Ward's assertion that 'old age presents very similar problems for both sexes – there is agreement that class

differences are dominant'.⁵³ Structural inequalities, based on class and race as well as sexual preferences, appear to operate as mutually reinforcing negative influences.

The significance of the stereotype operating in the early lives of the women is indicated in their accounts of how others attempted to restrict their horizons. Mrs Brown told me that she had won a scholarship to an exclusive girls' school, but had rejected it because her father decided that as the eldest daughter she should stay at home and assist with domestic duties. She describes being elderly as involving 'a lot of loneliness'. Mrs Thatcher described her decision to become a nurse. 'I told my father that I knew what I wanted to do, and he said "forget it, just stay at home and be a lady with your mother, you couldn't last the distance"'. Well, he died on a ship to England not long after that. It was tragic. Then, I became a nurse.'

Miss North's decision not to marry because of her feelings of incapability with children was made within a financial situation which meant she was able to support herself from an inheritance. She said, 'I never had to do anything I didn't want to', and was able to influence the course of her personal life in the direction she chose.

Mrs Thomas saw her experience in a munitions factory during World War II as 'fantastic, I really enjoyed it – and we got almost a man's wages, was that ever good!'. When I asked her about giving up the work, she said 'Oh, women didn't work then like they do today, not unless they really had to'. She and her husband were able to buy the block of units in which she lives and rent out the other flats. She described herself as having more commitments now than ever before.

Questions were posed as to whether the depression or wars had changed the subjects' life situations, since these were thought to be significant historical events. Most of the women interviewed did not view their lives as having been affected by these events to any significant extent. In regard to the depression, I was told, almost without exception, 'others were much worse off' and 'we were very lucky to have what we did'. Certainly, they could all really have been less affected by the depression than others. It is also possible that this attitude, in itself, may have been one means of coping with the difficulties of experiencing and being identified as poor. Those four women who had been in paid employment during either of the wars described their lives as having changed considerably. Those three women who had lost boyfriends, husbands and sons, did feel an impact on their lives.

Even among women who appeared to have rejected the stereotype, there were notable differences in power and control over different areas of one's life. A discrepancy between the control which elderly women

hold on a personal level, and the powerlessness which they experience in relation to wider social situations, was evident in responses such as Mrs Woods'. Mrs Woods' description of her husband as unwilling to accept responsibility involved his being 'quite happy to let the woman do all the managing of things'. When I asked how life changed after he died, she said, 'Well, the first thing I did was made my daughters executrix (sic) of my new will. Then I took the money I had and put it in a fixed deposit up there, so I'd have bills paid, and on pension day I put \$40.00 in the building society at 12½%.' While exhibiting such personal control in her own life, she referred to 'the terrible things happening in the world', and said, 'I know it's there, and I don't like it, but I can't do anything about it – what will be will be, but I won't look at it...'

This case is indicative of the limited change which can result from individualistic perspectives. Certainly, as this paper has asserted, elderly women are by no means a homogeneous group. What they do share, however, is that to some extent their experience is influenced by a common factor – the negative societal evaluation of being female and elderly. Individuals may, on a personal level, contradict the stereotype to which they are expected to conform, and may find means of adjusting to and justifying this contradiction. This does not, however, affect the source of the stereotype itself. Indeed, elderly women may have:

devised their own strategies to maintain an alternative myth of self respect. This never achieves the hegemonic quality of the ideology of the dominant group...it establishes for them a place in the world, even if the place is not one they would have chosen for themselves.⁵⁴

Historical, social and economic conditions may, indeed, have enabled particular women to resist the stereotype in certain aspects of their lives. This can do little in itself to change the extent to which they are denied status and power through the structural organisation of society.

A feminist analysis recognises the importance of using subjective, personal experiences as the basis from which wider-scale action will develop.

Older persons individually are powerless to alter their social status and conditions because their problems and appropriate remedies are socially defined, largely by the dominant members of the society.⁵⁵

Change is seen as necessary on the personal level, so that individuals will realise, through a process of 'consciousness-raising', that they are not themselves responsible for their powerless position, and collective action will come to be recognised as the means through which large-scale

change will be effected. Indeed, what is required is a source through which elderly women may 'critically reflect on their own experience and, as a result of this process, take action'.⁵⁶

The translation of individual experiences into political awareness has been recognised as the theoretical and practical basis of the Women's Liberation Movement. That 'the personal is political' has been one of the primary claims of feminist analysis, and the Women's Movement has served as a collective basis for struggle against discrimination and oppression.

The Women's Movement has shown that shared individual experience is an important part of the social discovery of a common condition...we are connected by a conscious choice, by an explicit decision to break with the more familiar outlets for our dissatisfaction and to discover together what is social and shared in our experience. Once we can perceive what is common to women, change and transformation become possible and the cycle of guilt and personal recrimination can be broken.⁵⁷

In view of this, it is particularly striking to note the scarcity of analysis and action in relation to the position of elderly women when one examines the last decade of the Women's Movement in Australia. Indeed, feminists have been predominantly concerned with those issues which are relevant to young women's lives, such issues as contraception childcare and equal pay. Perhaps this is not only a reflection of the youth of most of those women involved in the movement, but may also be a function of their inability to confront the reality and inevitability of ageing in their own lives. As Simone de Beauvoir points out, such avoidance of personal identification with older women may have persisted because 'in the old person that we must become, we refuse to recognise ourselves'.⁵⁸ As Mrs Carter told me, 'they think they're old at thirty. It's ridiculous. How can they know what it's really like?'

Possibilities of change in the situation of elderly women in the future through other effects must be noted and observed. Increasing numbers of older women have spent most of their lives in, or have re-entered, the labour force. These women may be less prepared to conform to social expectations of old age in the future. The participation of older women in educational institutions may also result in the transmission of more accurate ideas about themselves to others. In a similar fashion it could be anticipated that the increasing number of women who are raising children without a male partner will themselves become elderly women with knowledge and experience derived from making decisions and dealing with bureaucracies independently. Such women would be highly unlikely to accept a view of themselves as useless and incompetent and may, rather, see a need to collectively and actively oppose the

imposition of these ideas. Their life experience may lead them to collective action where men placed in similar situations have not.

The Women's Movement in the U.S.A. has begun to take up and act upon the claims of elderly women such as Maggie Kuhn,⁵⁹ who affirms that their situation is indeed a feminist issue. 'Not just on sheer numbers, but also in the oppression women have known through the years...the feminist movement has a great deal to do with their wellbeing and their continued selfhood...' Those women who are working with elderly women, particularly widows, recognise that:

Few feminist groups have reached out to widows because most widows are older than the feminists... Most feminists have not yet experienced widowhood, but that is changing.⁶⁰

The recent formation of feminist discussion groups for older women in New South Wales and Victoria may be first steps towards a comprehensive programme of consciousness-raising, self-awareness and political action which is based on a feminist analysis of the situation of elderly women. The study of 'Women over 60' currently in progress through the National Women's Advisory Council in Australia is indicative of the need for further information on elderly women.⁶¹ It is contended here, as was contended in the USA, that elderly women have the potential to add significantly to the strength and viability of the struggle for women. Feminist analysis provides a framework leading to action which takes account of the complexity and problems in the area of ageing, and future research should be conducted which sees its overall goal as:

with a great deal of flexibility, to accommodate the increasing size and heterogeneity of the ageing female population.⁶²

The study of elderly women needs to move beyond reliance on and perpetuation of negative images and must begin to focus on the diversity which characterises their lives. In this way, the stereotype itself may begin to be challenged.

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